Anglo-Norman parks in medieval Ireland by Fiona Beglane

Fiona Beglane, Anglo-Norman parks in medieval Ireland (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015)

There is a rich and long-established historiography of medieval English parks, which examines not only the bounds, uses, and regulation of parks, but also their symbolic associations and the function they served as displays of prestige. In Ireland, little work on the subject has appeared to date and Beglane's is the first major study of the subject. She has therefore had to address the practical details of parks in English Ireland – their location, bounds, physical remains, and uses – as well as their symbolic significance in settler society. In this difficult task, she has succeeded admirably and produced a truly interdisciplinary, comprehensive work.

She begins by discussing those parks attested in medieval Ireland, examining when, where, and by whom parks were created. She concludes that, in contrast to England, park building in Ireland had only one major phase that occurred between 1270 and 1339. After this, few new parks were built. Beglane attributes this to declining revenues from Irish lands and the vicissitudes of the colony in the later middle ages. Related to this is the fact that in Ireland parks were restricted largely to magnates, and did not filter down the social scale to the same extent that they did in England.

In the next two sections, Beglane uses a wide range of archaeological and historical methods to elucidate the uses of parks in Ireland. Using her analysis of animal bone, she argues that fallow deer, which were imported from England, were relatively rare in Ireland and the function of parks as a live larder and hunting venue may have been less central to their role in Ireland than in England. Venison was a high-status meat and valuable for gift-giving and displays of prestige at a lord's table, but red deer was widely accessible in Ireland, where large tracts of unclosed land made hunting them across open country possible. Hunting red deer in open country was the preferred method of Gaelic lords, who did not build parks, and it may have been the way that many Anglo-Irish lords below the level of the highest magnates hunted. In the Irish context, therefore, and in the smaller Irish parks in particular, the primary function of parks may have been for timber, pasturage, fruit trees, harvesting peat, and the like.

Beglane then assesses six parks of varying size and from across the colony as case studies and describes their morphology and surviving boundaries and monuments in detail. Her archaeological surveys of these parks identified several previously unrecorded archaeological monuments. This section is particularly well-illustrated with photographs, plans, and maps that set each park in their wider environment. These detailed surveys of specific parks set up the next, and most fascinating chapter, which looks at the symbolic uses of parks.

This chapter posits that park creation was a lordly act which demonstrated control of the land and sees emparkment as one expression of the English perception of Ireland as 'wild' and in need of 'civilisation'. In some cases, however, efforts to legitimise the imposition of English rule at a local level were based on Irish understandings of political legitimacy. Beglane links several parks to pre-existing sites of significance, like a sacred tree that may have stood in the lands of the Fitzgerald park at Maynooth. Parks retained some ceremonial significance, and Beglane argues that the Clann Uillaim Uachtair Burkes may have had a coronation chair or stone at their park in Earlspark, Co. Galway. If the Fitzgeralds and Burkes did consciously use their parks in ways that reflected local Irish conceptions about political legitimacy, this demonstrates an awareness of and engagement with Irish culture from an early date (Maynooth was emparked by the mid-thirteenth century) , and displays the cultural flexibility that allowed both families to survive and prosper in the colony.

This chapter also discusses views of and from the park. The way that parks looked were fundamental to their prestige, and parks were carefully designed to maximise, on one hand, privacy and seclusion for those within the park, and on the other, their impact as visual markers of status to those who viewed them from without. The historical record tells us little about prestige display and elite culture in the colony (particularly in secular rather than ecclesiastical contexts), and Beglane's insights are invaluable, adding to the very productive discussions of castles as visual markers of prestige that have characterised castle studies in Ireland in recent decades.

A glimpse into a rarely seen aspect of parks, that is local, non-elite perceptions of emparkment, may be provided by folklore associated with the park wall at Earlspark, Co. Galway. In local stories, a landless woman named Nora Novar asked for a plot of land to plant with potatoes and feed her starving family. She was denied by an unsympathetic landlord, but asked for and was granted only that land which she could build a wall around in one night. Depending on the version, she either used magic to enclose a large piece of land or, more prosaically, relied on the help of her family and friends. This story presents the park wall of Earlspark as a strange, and perhaps magical, imposition on the countryside, but also reclaimed it from the ruling elite for the local population. However, the clearly modern elements of the tale (like the mention of potatoes) suggest, as Beglane acknowledges, that the story has been modified considerably, if not wholly invented, in the post-medieval era. It would be fascinating if it were a version of medieval story relating to the construction of the park, but proving this is extremely difficult. Furthermore, the connection between Nora and the anthropomorphised figure of sovereignty seems to me to be somewhat strained.

Two further, small quibbles relate to the historical material, which Beglane uses very effectively for the most part. The first is that the *hibernicus* Geoffrey McWyther who fled his lord in 1306 was an unfree Irish tenant (betagh) not just an 'Irishman'; the actions of the various parties when McWyther fled are only intelligible in the context of his servile status. The second is that the subdivision of parcels of land in the park of Callan does not provide evidence of a deliberate policy of subletting small plots while leaving the park largely intact. Rather, it is likely that the portion of park 'in the lady hand's' was hers in dower.

The final substantive chapter examines the fate of seven parks from 1350 to the present day, and it again displays an impressive range of sources and approaches to flesh out the post-medieval history of each park. Her work on Dunamase and the improvements to the park by Charles Stewart Parnell's ancestors in the eighteenth century provides a particularly interesting parallel for medieval park building as a way of expressing control and prestige.

Beglane's scholarly range and genuine interdisciplinarity is impressive. So is her skill in distilling the results of her extensive archaeological and historical research into a convincing and readable narrative. This book will be the standard work on parks in medieval Ireland, but it has great value for other areas as well, as it sheds new light on elite culture, ethnic interaction, and displays of political power and legitimacy in medieval Ireland.